Greater Resources, and Reach, for New Health Humanities and Bioethics Department

The University of Rochester is now among a handful of academic medical centers in the nation to establish a department of Health Humanities and Bioethics. The decision to elevate the former division of Health Humanities to department status is rooted in the University of Rochester’s legacy in biopsychosocial medicine, but it also points to the future, and the efforts under way to build a more diverse, equitable and inclusive culture here.

Mark Taubman, M.D., CEO of the Medical Center and Dean of the School of Medicine and Dentistry said, “Today, we recognize how persistent disparities of opportunity in our society negatively impact individual and public health, and how crises such as the COVID pandemic test our ability to deliver health care equitably and fairly. There is no better time to reaffirm our deep commitment to humanities and bioethics, and to build a departmental framework to instill these principles in our learners, add to the body of knowledge and transform our culture.”

Medical Humanities had been a division since 1984 and had two full-time faculty leading its work: Stephanie Brown Clark, Associate Professor of Health Humanities & Bioethics, joined the Division of Medical Humanities in 1998 and has served as its director since 2012.  Marjorie Shaw, who joined in 2011, is Associate Professor, Director of the Division of Bioethics, and Interim Director of the Schyve Center of Bioethics.

“There are only eight true departments of health humanities at academic medical centers in the country,” said Brown Clark. “To be one of them is a significant advancement, especially in a first-tier research institution like ours. It shows the institution’s commitment to evidence-based research and to addressing the broader social, cultural and societal challenges we all face.”

“The University was one of the first medical schools to create a formal Division of Medical Humanities, which housed the Program for Clinical Ethics and ultimately became the Division of Medical Humanities and Bioethics,” Shaw said. “We have always valued the methods and materials from the humanities, social sciences, and the arts as essential for the development of intellectual tools necessary to critically explore perspectives and values around health, illness, and patient care. The Health Humanities support the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to attend to the moral and social aspects of healthcare.”

Elevation of the work to department status “Is a wonderful step forward,” said Brown Clark. “We have been a very small group but we’ve partnered with many wonderful collaborators, including physicians interested in the topics we teach; humanity scholars from the River Campus; and graduate students who taught seminars with us for years. We started small, we’ve grown, but never imagined we’d become a department until Dean Taubman proposed this. The motivation is recognition of the value of the biopsychosocial model – it grounds the work we do.”

Present-day health care challenges, including a global pandemic and growing awareness of disparities in health care delivery, highlight the importance of integrating humanities and bioethics in health care delivery, medical education and research.

The new department is closely linked with the mission and work of the Office of Equity and Inclusion, led by Senior Associate Dean Adrienne Morgan, Ph.D. Morgan is Vice President of Equity and Inclusion and Associate Professor in the Department of Health Humanities and Bioethics.

“We see Health Humanities and Bioethics as our ‘academic home’,” Morgan said. “There is so much intersectionality in what we do and opportunity for collaboration. We’re eager to develop our partnership and see it flourish in the years to come,” says Morgan.

“We’re very excited to be working with Dr. Morgan and her team,” said Brown Clark. “We will partner with her and Office of Equity and Inclusion faculty to develop innovative education programs to support diversity, equity and inclusion, and to do scholarship on this work.”

As the Medical Center’s Director of Clinical Bioethics, Shaw led collective decision-making by medical teams throughout the pandemic to help ensure equitable distribution of limited health care resources, including respirators and COVID vaccines.

“Taking care of patients, conducting scientific research, and engaging with communities are all moral endeavors,” she said. “By creating a Department of Health Humanities and Bioethics, the University of Rochester elevates and expands the contributions of the former Division of Medical Humanities and Bioethics to better support the institutional mission. The Department’s interprofessional and interdisciplinary collaborations will improve the well-being of our patients, providers, researchers, learners, and the communities we serve.”

The Division was primarily focused on SMD education for medical students and graduate students in its Master’s program in Health Humanities, grounded in the biopsychosocial approach to healthcare.

Several of its programs demonstrated the value of that approach. A collaboration with the Memorial Art Gallery brings medical and nursing students, residents and faculty to the art museum to view its works in small groups to develop clinical skills in observation, visual diagnosis, teamwork, and self-reflection on biases and assumptions.

As a department, Health Humanities and Bioethics will have an expanded role and resources.  Brown Clark serves as interim chair during the national search for department chair, led by Jeffrey Lyness, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry and Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

“We are very excited about the opportunities for the first permanent chair to build upon the many strengths of the department and its people. Not surprisingly, then, we have seen very strong interest from outstanding candidates representing many of the disciplines encompassed by the department’s missions. The recruitment process is moving forward on schedule, and we hope to have the new chair in place by early in the upcoming academic year.”

“We model interprofessional, interdisciplinary teaching, and this institution has been unbelievably supportive in our work to date,” said Brown Clark. “We have created small pilot programs for SMD students that have expanded out to residency programs in our School of Nursing and nursing education at Nazareth College. With more faculty, we will be able to grow our footprint to be present across all the communities at the Medical Center.”

 “The operational advantages to having a Department of Health Humanities & Bioethics are significant,” Shaw said. “As an academic department, HHBE will be better positioned to collaborate and support the clinical, educational, research, and administrative departments, centers, and services.”

 “As the birthplace of the biopsychosocial approach, the University of Rochester has a long history of integrating humanities into medical training, and expanding this work supports the institution’s aspirations to create a culture where every person feels safe, welcome, and supported,” she added.

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